



NEW YORK LETTER

CARTER RATCLIFF

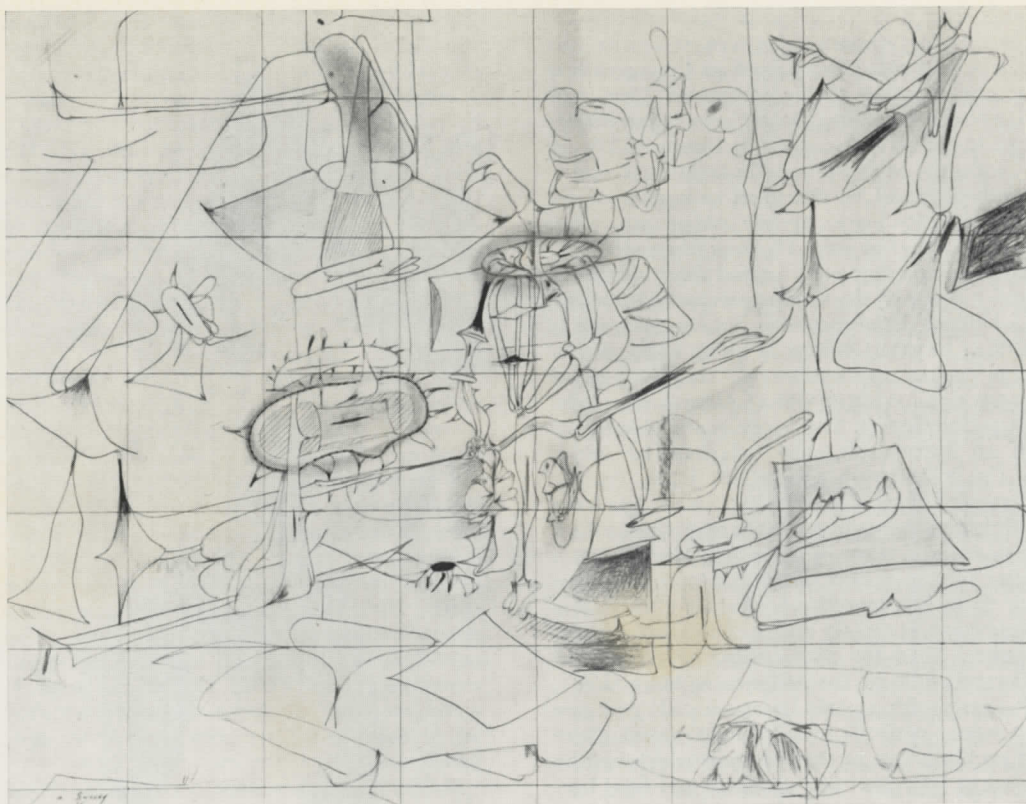
Nowadays, halfway between Christmas and the new year, most of the galleries are featuring group shows. Each artist is represented by one work. This occasionally produces some surprising juxtapositions but more often it doesn't. Each gallery has a rather unified look and to go from one to another is to sense an orderliness that may or may not be there. It is there on the surface but, after a while, art displayed in this way tends to cancel itself out. A mild chaos in the manner of a blur suggests that the orderliness is an illusion and this is probably a good thing. Chaos in the art scene (not in art) is probably more useful than any order likely to be imposed.

The Dwan Gallery has taken the occasion to exhibit posters and other memorabilia in a tenth anniversary show. One sees Rauschenberg and Rivers replaced by minimalists and conceptualists. The latter become producers of earth works. This show wasn't intended as a history of American art in the last decade and yet there have been so many backward looking surveys in recent years that it is natural, for a moment, to see the Dwan show as another one of them. The historical survey has emerged as a major form. Nothing so frivolous as an art form, however. It's a critic's form employed in deadly earnest. The times seem to require it. Negative capability is on the skids (or somewhere). Everyone can sympathize with a dislike for chaos. I'm glad the galleries will soon again be looking more focused, but focused doesn't mean frozen. It's amusing to see that the Dwan's anniversary show is just as convincing as history—without intending to be taken that way—as any ten-year period in the current show of New York painting and sculpture at the Metropolitan Museum, though the latter is desperately anxious to be taken as history, I mean, gospel.

The Museum of Modern Art put on an Alexander Calder exhibit assembled from works in its own collection. There were several of Calder's early caricatures in bent wire; *Josephine Baker*, *The Hostess*, *Portrait of a Man*. By constructing sculpture out of line he used cubism's overlapping planes to reveal shape instead of elaborate it. No self-sufficient autonomy for Calder. He wanted to make certain references and he made them with brilliance. His small wire animals were dazzling. At the beginning of the thirties he began, in his mobiles, to use abstracted, bio-morphic shapes but the desire to make reference was still there. Now they were references more to principles of growth and motion than to objects or people. His bent wire sculptures were convincing as caricatures. One saw his idea of a person. In the mobiles and the later works, caricature was elevated to the expression of insight, likewise a personal matter. Or if one objects to the idea that art is expressive, one could say that his major work embodies insight. His ambition is suggested by his titles. A construction of 1934 of wood, wire, string and pipe is called *A Universe*. Small wooden spheres move in orbits attached to an ascending segment of pipe which functions like a segment of the much, much larger orbit of a huge body. To go from this implied, imaginary body back to the small wooden ones is to see them take on importance in defiance of their scale. Everything can seem huge.

His work embodies too the insight that everything, even a universal, can belong to the person who 'discovers' it for himself. It's not just that the Calder touch is always recognizable. He leaves his methods open to view, not only the principles of balance in his mobiles but the homeliest details of his production methods. This has sometimes seemed a coy affectation, but it usually works to anchor his very large subjects in their source—his own working process and, by extension, in the viewer's response.

This opposition of large subjects and intuitions to tiny particularities of detail seems cen-



Gorky. *Study for Dark Green Painting*, 1946. Pencil and crayon, 23½ × 18½". M. Knoedler & Co.

tral to Calder's work and makes the largeness of his subjects possible. His universals (generalities) convince even now when so much attention goes to specialists. There are other, perhaps endless, oppositions in his work. The delight of his forms in the mobiles is opposed to their motion. The heaviness of his stabiles is opposed to their reluctance to touch the ground. Stable is opposed to mobile in an untitled work from the early forties. This piece looks very large in photographs and yet it is less than a foot tall. Calder's opposing factors usually combine to set a work somehow free of them—an iron surface painted a primary color ends up as an orbiting place rather than a somewhat easily described object.

There were a number of watercolors and gouaches from 1931 through 1969. They were presented as completed works but they seemed to be stages on the way to his more comprehensive works in metal. Several pieces of the jewelry from the thirties and forties were shown. Though they were in metal they seemed as (ultimately) tentative as his paintings. Because of their flatness, I think. Calder is not concerned with flatness. Unlike many sculptors, whose problem is to expand into space or, like Giacometti, to keep it from erasing what they have created, Calder seems to have begun with his imagination occupying three dimensions (as in his early wire sculpture-drawings) and then set himself the problem of advancing into the fourth.

Arshile Gorky is impossible to consider apart from art history. Much of the attention directed toward him is an attempt to arrange in chronological order works he left undated. And these attempts are always founded in considerations of Gorky's historical relation to schools of European and American painting. These efforts are important because Gorky himself was involved with art history in a deliberate way—by that I mean it was a source of feeling for him. So historical generalizations are worse than useless in treating him unless they are put at the service of the critic's feeling for Gorky's individual art history. It's no good seeing historical connections in his work. One must see them as part of his work—as a source of his art mingled with entirely private sources. To see art history subordinated to private artistic concerns is not to give over the possibility of clear understanding. On the contrary, it is the only way to give understanding an appropriate particularity.

Gorky provides one with a chance to do this. His progress through cubism, through and beyond surrealism is an important part of

genuine, that is, felt history. Here I'd like to concentrate on one detail. It brings up the issue of space in surrealism. Theirs is the ordinary 'realistic' space of the photograph. For the most part, it lacks even perspective. And yet it has none of the complexity of the 'primitive' space that preceded the Renaissance. In short, the surrealists weren't much concerned with the issue. Gorky came to them having worked out a highly sophisticated version of late cubism. The recent, very extensive Knoedler exhibit of his drawings included two dozen drawings from the 1930's which showed Gorky tightening and intensifying the relationships between the facets and planes which compose his space in this period. By the end of the decade there is an elegance and ease in his control of it. When his surrealist forms appear in the 1940's they occupy a shallow version of the rather simple surrealist stage. Here is the point—a point of art history as invented by Gorky—by the mid-forties he is enough in touch with his new forms and their symbolic value to begin to charge their surroundings with some of the spatial intensity he had created in his cubist period. Surreal forms usually occupy space by the 'radiations' of their weird meanings. This is not a plastic effect. Gorky's forms in this period have the power to do that—as much as the best surreal forms do—but there is more, something entirely plastic. Many of the appendages to his creatures, especially the smaller shapes, can be read as either positive or negative. For example, he employs a narrow, triangular form—when a number of them are clustered around the end of a limb or stem they seem to be small, sharp petals. Given singly and pointing into an empty area, such a shape can be read as a slit at the edge of a wide, smooth mass. This ambiguity—so deeply grounded in the relation of hand to eye and eye to exterior matter—is foreign to surrealism and yet in Gorky's drawings it enhances the value of his surreal inventions. It is as if another world of forms and thereby symbolic meanings were overlaying those apparent to a surrealist reading. This complexity is derived from his cubist work where negative-positive ambiguities are often starting places for plastic invention. Gorky's ability to take so much from surrealism while giving away so little from his former mode is astonishing. Conversions from one style to another are usually much more thorough-going. I feel that Gorky was able to continue adding to his powers because of the way he felt art history. It would have been impossible for him to leave behind the discoveries he made when he was working

with reverence for the cubist masters. It would have been impossible for him to ignore the symbolic possibilities presented by surrealism or the meaning of the careers of Miró and Masson, two major painters who began before him as cubists and, each in his own way, helped to form the early history of surrealism. Gorky's synthesis could be described as a view of art history which leaves stylistic categories as open to each other as were his later forms. He produced an art that went beyond those categories and influenced the development of a later one—Abstract Expressionism. But, as everyone is willing to admit so long as he isn't required to give up any assumptions, all art goes beyond categories. Art history is not a pattern in art to be extracted from it. Art history is to be discovered as an inextricable aspect of particular works.

I'm harping on the pitfalls of art history because I think a lot of critics and artists have fallen into them. In a certain way, that is their concern and none of mine but misconception after misconception finally has an effect even on those, like myself, who feel that isolation is important at certain stages of creation and response. Take the *Spaces* show which opened December 30 at the Museum of Modern Art. It comes with a perfectly respectable pedigree to make a perfectly reasonable statement: there is no limitation to the materials which can be used to create art nor are there any final barriers between art and the rest of experience. Schwitters and his *Merzbau*; Gabo and his concern with enhancing perception; and the Futurists with their desire for an encompassing, environmental art are all given as ancestors of the artists exhibiting here. With such impeccable ancestors, such suggestive ideas, and such a respected institution behind them, these artists were a part of art history as soon as the show was announced. That's all right. We know that some events will have historical significance whatever their content turns out to be. This acceptance of the future isn't in itself bad. But there are occasions when the particularities of the future event are never really examined, that is, experienced, once they have arrived in the present. I think this will be the case with four out of the six exhibits in the Modern's new show. Certain misuses of art history have become so standard that these four works will be discussed, for the most part, in ways that have little to do with any individual's experience of them. I'll talk later about the two exceptions,

Robert Morris' exhibit and Dan Flavin's. First of all—a look at successful non-environmental works of art. A painting, say, is closed. It contains a self-sufficient structure. Though it may, in addition contain references beyond itself, it is presented as complete. I think it's fair to say that most people don't respond to such structures. The slightest feeling for the ambience in galleries and museums is enough to make that clear. An adequate response involves a creative effort nearly equal to the artist's and, even when it is made, the successful viewer is, in a literal way (and perhaps in other ways), still excluded from the work.

Now—these works in the *Spaces* show are very different. The viewer must enter into them physically. Participation is automatic, denied to no one. The artist can count on a response. His art is in designing an environment where this is the case. His design must be left incomplete. It must, in fact, be a near void or chaos, differentiated or given form only insofar as that form is open—*automatically*—to anyone who enters. Further, this random entering must—*automatically*—result as less formlessness. The participant must feel that his entrance means something, has an effect. That sounds good. It seems, on paper, a solution to the problem that art in our culture has been ignored by most people and misused by most of the rest.

At the *Spaces* show, one begins with critical and curatorial discussions of traditional problems. These are followed by descriptions of historically 'significant' contemporary solutions. Turning then to the solutions themselves is discouraging even when one has been warned that the works in question are just first steps. (I hope no one suggests that the art-lover go directly to the works without any preparation. He'd be better off going to an amusement park.) Michael Asher's environment is a small room completely sound-proofed. All six interior surfaces are covered with a sound-absorbing material. Very little in the way of color or texture has been permitted. The experience is of a benign oppressiveness. With sound drawn out of the air, the dimensions of the room are faithfully reported by everyone to be reduced. This feeling of reduction contains whatever form the work has. One is given a new way of perceiving space. One is reminded that we rely on senses other than sight for part of our intuition of spatial volume. To be snide again—I've gotten more valuable intimations along these

lines by riding in an elevator. That's true but it's not enough. It's more important to mention the possibility that what small educational value there is in Asher's exhibit will be lost, and that's not entirely the fault of its smallness. Present concerns with the ability of art to expand sensory awareness, combined with the prestige of the Museum and the history gotten up for the occasion, will displace most of the attention from Asher's work to ideas of its significance. In the midst of this confusion, the important ability to detect the banal (to have a sense of scale) won't even be consulted.

If I sound pessimistic it's because I anticipate that many of those who dislike this show as much as I do will dislike it because it doesn't provide them with the sentimental interludes they take for the purpose of art. That is the nostalgic critique and I want to say that Asher's work annoys me because I fear its power to curtail (somewhat) possibilities for the future. Larry Bell's environment is a completely, or almost completely, darkened room split down the middle by a wall. As one enters and one's eyes adjust, pale streaks of light appear high above one's head. There is roughly as much to be learned here as in Asher's exhibit. As one moves, the streaks of light move. They are impossible to locate spatially. One relies on vision here and it is shown to have certain inadequacies. That Bell's environment employs coated sheets of glass and, further, that he developed a new technique for coating them makes it convenient to see this work as an extension of his previous work with tinted glass boxes, but there seems more than an even chance that certain less easily documented facts will not be widely noted—for example, that this exhibit is a bore whereas his boxes aren't.

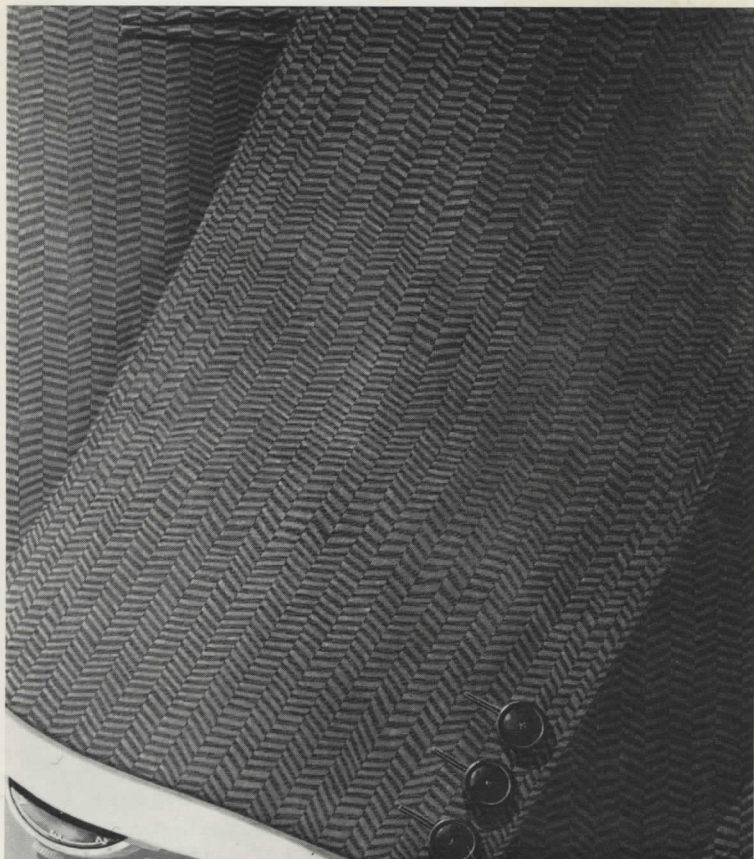
Franz Erhard Walther employs human-sized, canvas containers. Participants are invited to enter them. Sometimes one is isolated in ways that don't usually occur. Sometimes new relations with others are established. The idea is that by controlling the participant's ability to move in space, the artist will educate him to new and precise understandings of his body and the relationship of his emotions to his bodily situation. This environment is much more active or activating than the two I've mentioned but it still has pretty severe limits. A game that requires so little of the player gets played out very quickly.

The Pulsa group from Boston has set up one

Calder. *Whale II*, 1964 after the original of 1937. Sheet steel, painted; 68 × 69½ × 45½". Collection The Museum of Modern Art, New York



Gnoli. *Wrist Watch*, 1969. Oil/canvas, 79 × 67". Sidney Janis Gallery



of their light-heat-sound environments in the Museum's sculpture garden. Unlike the others, it is exciting in traditional ways. The jittery, flashing lights form 'interesting' patterns in space. The heaters glow with a decorative orange. The various sounds are mysterious. There isn't so much taken from sculpture as from theatre and *son et lumière* displays. However—there is a large bank of electronic equipment on view at the far end of the garden. Sounds made by people in the garden feed into this equipment and are fed back in the form of changing light, sound, and heat patterns. The trouble is that this process must be believed in. It's not to be felt. Of these four exhibits, Pulsa's is the least successful as an environment. Literally speaking, it is an environment, the most extensive and the most attractive. But the viewer doesn't become a participant.

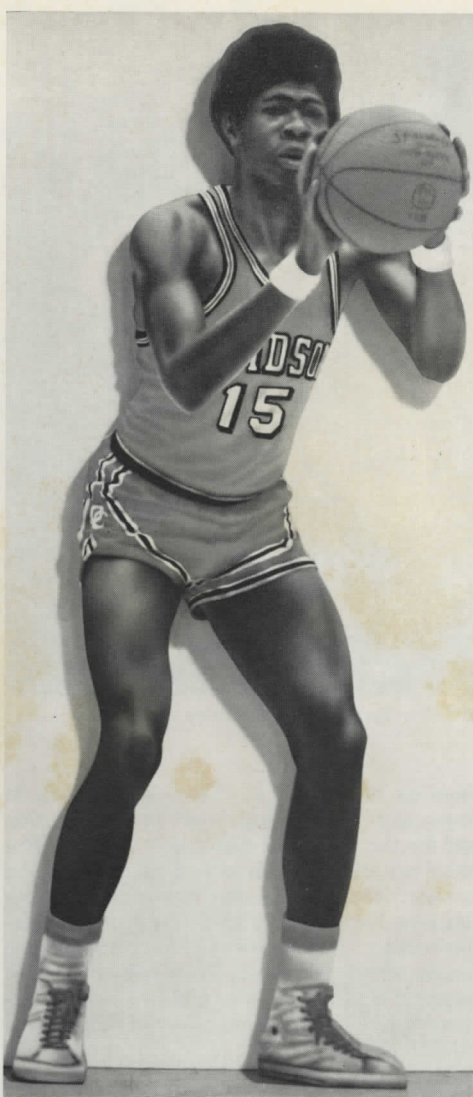
Surely this work could be programmed so that each person who entered the garden would see or feel his entrance reflected—fed back to him as a new pattern. If it could be arranged that way, then Pulsa's attempt to alter the sense of time-flow would have a chance of succeeding. The question seems to be whether or not, in the nature of things (such as computers), the need for an automatic effect on the environment can be reconciled with the need for that effect to be worth the trouble, that is, capable of engaging an individual in a deeply felt response.

Let's say the reconciliation will be made. It would alter consciousness unimaginably if changing objects or environments offered—automatically and to everyone—experiences as complex and valuable as those offered to some by the aloof objects created in traditional mediums. Or perhaps that's the sort of experience offered by individuals to each other. Anyway, our current critiques with their inflated ideas of significance don't touch on these questions and so don't touch on those areas of experience where value is felt or felt to be missing. As they are now, the four exhibits I've described have all the importance of a new twist in a fad—thus, no little importance—and the justifications for them are based on superficial historical connections. Tatlin, Schwitters, and Gabo all started with fully achieved, high-quality non-environmental works and attempted to extend that quality beyond the limits of traditional mediums. These new exhibits are based on premises of openness and near-formlessness that make considerations of quality and value extremely problematic. An atmosphere has developed in which this obvious distinction escapes nearly everyone. It may not make much difference. The best artists get along on their own and the same is true of their serious audience.

The viewer enters Robert Morris' space and then he is on his own. Nothing happens automatically. Two narrow, shoulder-high aisles cross in the center of the room. One looks upward to see rows of small pine trees planted in patches of peat moss sloping upward toward the corners. The more distant the tree, the smaller it is. A false perspective takes effect. This trick plus the displacement (one usually looks down to see such small plants and one remembers pine trees as being much larger), the cramped space, and the oddity of finding a 'forest' indoors is ridiculous in an inspired way. No doubt Morris is pursuing his purely conceptual concerns here but he includes more than a touch of his earlier Neo-Dada flair in this exhibit.

Dan Flavin shows a work employing green and yellow-orange fluorescent light. I didn't have my tape measure with me so I can't give this exhibit the description it, I mean, Flavin cries out for. I'll just say it was a success.

Howard Kanowitz displayed his newest 'free standing sculptured canvases' at the Waddell Gallery. They were replicas of basketball players in action. The painted canvas was stretched over a cutout support with the proper outline. They were life-like but only because we're so used to considering photographs life-like. Kanowitz emphasized, for me, the absurdity of this habit by making the bodies of his



Kanowitz. *Basketball Star Mike Maloy of Davidson*. Free standing sculptured canvas, 71" high. Waddell Gallery

figures only about four feet high. He also showed sketches made in preparation for the final works (they were like color coded painting kits) and photographs from which the sketches were derived.

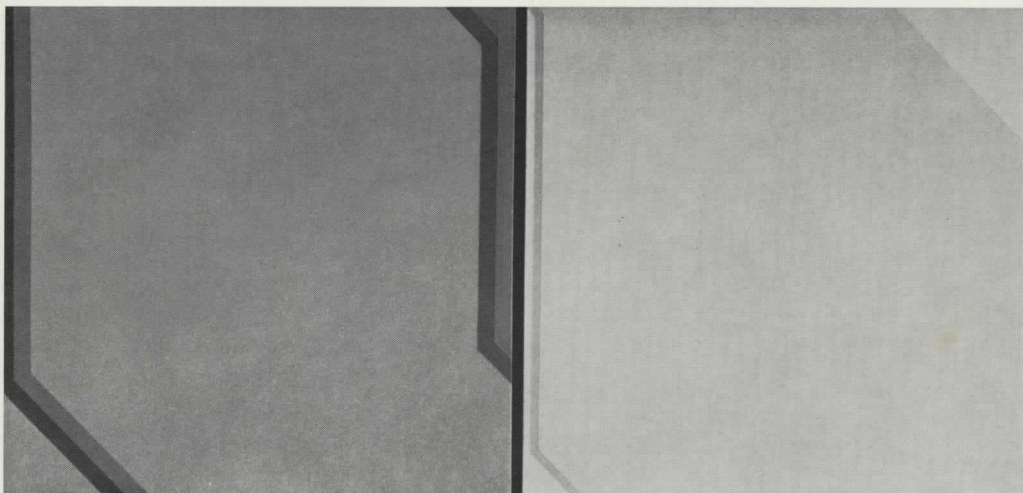
Kanowitz makes the point that his method of painting allows everything to be treated the same way. Most methods, even the most painterly, do the same thing. He means that he is so methodical in designing and executing his works, and sticks so closely to the 'information' in the photographs, that the nature of the subject has no effect on him. There is a connection here between his method and that of non-painterly abstractionists. His paint handling is much more intricate but it is equally detached. And yet, the decision to depict something (anything) *does* make a difference. The medium as Kanowitz employs it hardly ever becomes a message of shape as shape or color as color. He says he wants his works to be super-real, realer

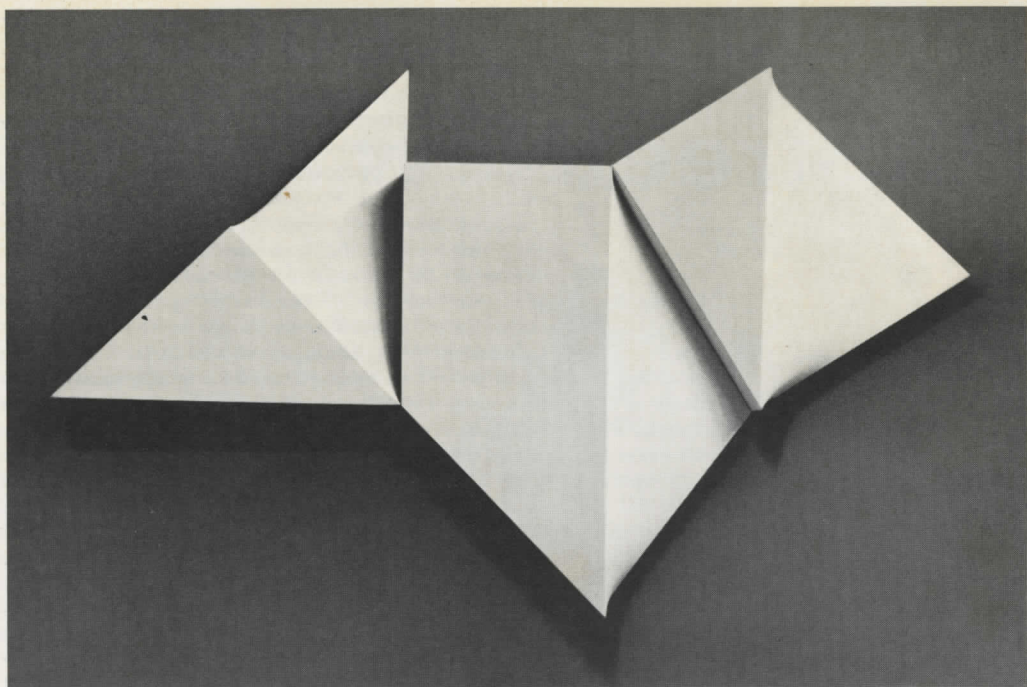
than the real. In one sense he fails. The eye soon learns to pick out a Kanowitz from what surrounds it. But in a more interesting sense his statement is indecipherable. Does he mean that his images are realer than the original object or person because they have been filtered through so many processes and mediums and so have more history and thereby more presence? Does he mean that, since everything is equal before his method, the most important differentiations can be found in the particularities of process that each work entails? He probably doesn't mean either of these things, but he must mean something along these lines. Of course, he would never have to admit to any such meaning. He succeeds in embedding these questions in the paintings themselves. His ambiguities are completely built-in.

Domenico Gnoli is an Italian painter who showed for the first time in America at the Janis Gallery. His paintings usually approached the square format, around five by six feet in size. This shape reminded me of snapshots and his subjects did too. There was *Green Bedcover*, *Armchair*, *Pocket*, *Unbuttoned Button*, and so on. It was as if a small portion of a casual family photo had been enlarged to many times normal size while preserving its proportions and its homeiness. The effect wasn't strange or exaggerated, perhaps because these subjects all have a quiet importance and Gnoli's paintings seemed to be acknowledging that. Importance may not be quite the right word, but all his subjects or details of subjects have often engaged the eye. There was something familiar about seeing their textures grown immense. These paintings seemed to reward previous attention. Gnoli's painting was modest, drawing no attention to itself. His work was too gentle and friendly to be surrealistic and too private to be called Pop Art. It guided the memory into complete beguilement. In the present, these paintings showed that scale is merely an invention and can be dispensed with whenever the attention is free to indulge itself. The style of clothing and furniture was 'modern'. The impossibility of pinning it down any more definitely worked to remove a sense of scale from time as well as from objects.

Tony Harrison showed new paintings at the Bertha Schaefer Gallery. A single work was often composed of two or three separate canvases. Thin stripes around the edges gave the illusion of large overlapping planes. Where the stripes tilted slightly away from the vertical or horizontal, the planes seemed to go slightly askew, sometimes warping the surface. Often a stripe would stop as it approached another canvas in the same work. On the next canvas a new color would predominate and then at the farthest edge the entire color-space arrangement would be unified in a startling way. Harrison was able to contain the most disparate colors within the same work. Sometimes the thin space between two sections of a painting would function almost as a stripe of color joining them. Here the space would get very complex. Rather deep illusionary space would compete with literal space only as deep as the stretcher

Harrison. *Lemon-blue six*, 1969. Plastic/cotton duck, diptych, 33 x 67". Bertha Schaefer Gallery





Sydney Butchkes. *Wyandanch*, 1969. Oil/canvas, 49 x 80". Bertha Schaefer Gallery

width. In the large works confined to a single horizontal canvas, Harrison would often cut off a corner by letting a stripe break away from the edge. This would make an empty expanse of canvas appear to be a forward wall of a three dimensional volume. Then the stripes would read as the edges of planes perpendicular to the surface of the painting. Harrison's work is quiet, sober, and filled with visual surprise.

Sidney Butchkes followed Harrison at the Schaefer Gallery. His shaped canvas constructions were composed of geometric shapes, mostly triangles. Flat surfaces alternated with planes curved so perfectly that from a distance only the curving edge of a shadow revealed the difference. Much of the canvas in these works was painted white. A fanciful way of describing them would be to say that they demonstrated a geometry of snow drifts. This geometry was so precisely realized that where Butchkes employed unpainted beige and off-white canvas it had the same immaculate quality as the white surfaces did.

The Frumkin Gallery's holiday show was a selection of Dada and Surrealist drawings. Schwitters' drawings in crayon and watercolor were dazzling. They contained much blank paper but the few images in them structured his space as intricately and imaginatively as the scraps of paper structure his collages. There was a selection of four drawings by Gorky. He was surrounded by Tanguy, Miró, and Matta. This display suggested the *accuracy* as well as the individuality with which Gorky responded to his surrealist influences. He didn't, it seems, miss a trick. It was pleasant to see works by Moholy-Nagy, Richard Lindner, and George Grosz—all differing among each other greatly and all at home in this exhibit.

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There are a number of reasons for the appearance of the new galleries in the downtown, South Houston area. Most important is the lack of available space uptown. There isn't much room for expansion on 57th St. or upper Madison Avenue where there are often four to six galleries in one building. Also, the loft neighborhood below Houston St. has become an important center for artists in recent years and the new galleries benefit from being nearby. I'm not exactly sure how they benefit. I think the incongruity of the setting has something to do with it. Uptown, art blends so easily into fashion—I mean the *Vogue* magazine kind. In South Houston there's absolutely nothing of interest except art as such and that's an aid to focusing the attention. In fact, simply to find the Paula Cooper Gallery, the downtown Feigen branch, or the brand-new Max Hutchinson Gallery requires an effort as great as finding an artist's loft. There aren't many

building directories in this neighborhood. It began as a warehouse and light industry section and for the most part that's what it still is. But doing without uptown amenities is worth the trouble. The imagination shown in choosing this new locale shows up in the gallery directors' choice of new artists. One of my favorite recent developments is ultra-painterly stain painting that's so heavily featured in the current Whitney annual and many of those artists exhibit downtown. I haven't mentioned the O.K. Harris Gallery so far because its decor seems like a bit of transplanted 57th St. but the works on view there seem to fit right into the neighborhood.

While the galleries were moving downtown for their own reasons, the Art Workers Coalition was moving down here to escape the galleries. This politically minded group, which picketed the Museum of Modern Art several times to protest its acquisition policies, has established 'Museum', a loft on lower Broadway where artists without gallery representation can show their work. Museum has a current 10-man show of young artists of various persuasions. Some of the work looks as if it will be seen in galleries quite soon. Some of it seems to be student's work. I like Sharon Brand's large, unstretched stain painting. Clouds and spatters

of gray contain thin lines zipping here and there in an ethereal manner. The slightly wrinkled surface of the canvas keep them from being literally straight. One had to imagine them as lines before one could see the lush space they travel through. Allan Bermowitz shows two works composed of lit light bulbs on the floor. Bunched instead of scattered, they are very much themselves—transparent bulbs giving off white light in a small work; bulbs of different colors, sizes, and shapes in the other—but they lend themselves to metaphorical readings too. Geography, architecture, cellular structure, all glowing, are suggested. Bermowitz lists the medium of these striking and frantic works as light, heat, sound, and smell.

The David Whitney Gallery—one of the new downtown crowd though it's on 19th St., a little distant from the others—showed paintings by Lewis Stein. His vocabulary was minimal but he seemed to be concerned with the infinite. I don't want to impute any grandiose designs to this artist, and yet 'infinity' in its plainest sense (stripped of symbolic overlay) is the most convenient word to use in referring to his large, horizontal, white-painted canvases. Their white surfaces prevented them from being seen as objects limited and literalized by their own dimensions. Stein was giving segments of something endless. He invented geometric figures in order to measure it or to find a measure in it. That's where his color came in. Small vertical rectangles—half red and half blue—were set along the bottom edge of one canvas. There was no deduction here. The rectangles, arranged in a simple rhythm, were set *against* the whiteness. The measurement they gave was not intended to be definitive—only to be *some sort* of measurement, a clear gesture to oppose the emptiness of the canvas. The varieties of his measurements was impressive. Each painting showed a different and convincing attack. A large pentagon in orange was set next to a purple hexagon. Again, the lower edge of the figures rested on the lower edge of the canvas. The rhythm (measure) of each form was arbitrary and entirely sufficient. Stein placed a vertical column in the left-hand side of another painting. The column was divided into small horizontal rectangles. These smaller shapes were given a precise color pattern—another measuring gesture. Stein never relied on spatial illusion to control the whiteness. His way of dealing with the 'impossible' while leaving so much of it untouched was quite a feat. Like all successful feats it had, along with its flair, a braininess to it which worked in the full effect as a touch of poignance.

Ted Hughes. *Untitled*, 1968. Acrylic, 52 x 66". Shown at "The Museum"

